

The University of Chicago

EASTERN CHEROKEE SOCIAL OR-
GANIZATION

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
SOCIAL SCIENCES IN CANDIDACY FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

1934

By

WILLIAM HARLEN GILBERT

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INTRODUCTION

The Cherokee Tribe of southeastern United States has played an important part during the expansion of the southern colonies westward but accurate ethnologic observations on these Indians are few and extremely scattered. A complete anthropological survey of these people is not intended here but rather the purpose of the present paper is to outline a theory of Cherokee Social Organization based on the outlook of the Functionalist School of Anthropology. The factual material submitted here is based on available records and on the writer's personal field studies in western North Carolina in the autumn of 1932.

THE FORMER SOCIETY

The original home of these southern kinsmen of the fierce Iroquois was a high region of wooded mountains and fertile, well watered valleys in what is now western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee. From their well protected fortresses in this difficult region they made sudden sallies on the Indians of the surrounding lowland areas and generally returned to their misty hills laden with booty and captives. Alternately on the war path or smoking the pipe of peace with their neighbors the Cherokee found it advantageous to be prepared for either eventuality by means of a dual organization of officials, a Red Group to deal with war and a White Group to deal with peace.

The Red Group consisted of a Chief Captain or Skayegusta elected at periodical intervals and a council of seven clan heads together with a large staff of minor officials. The term of office of these men was dependent on their success in war and abilities in acquiring titles for bravery. Their participation in war was regarded as rendering them unclean and so they were always purified in special ceremonies upon their return from a campaign.

In spite of the frequent and all absorbing importance of military activities the Red Group was not as important as the hereditary White Officials who consisted of a White Chief or Uku, seven clan heads or councilors, and a large set of minor officials. The White Group carried on the important annual ceremonies of the Tribe as well as the majority of the peace time judicial and administrative functions. The uku was more powerful than the skayegusta and could make or unmake him. Similarly the power of

the peace officials as a group was great enough in certain towns called "white towns" to modify the law of blood revenge in those towns which became "cities of refuge" for refugees from the lex talionis.

Peace, although not always desired in foreign relations, was greatly appreciated in the internal affairs of the Tribe. Those differences which could not be composed through the law of blood revenge, the ball game, or similar devices were settled at the annual Cementation Festival of early November. At this ceremony all those who had been involved in quarrels laid aside their grudges and reaffirmed their solidarity with their fellow tribesmen and with the supernatural powers on high. Old belongings, such as clothing and utensils, were discarded and new fire was built to symbolize the new and untainted life into which the tribe entered for the ensuing year.

The local unit of social organization was the village. Within each settlement or "town" there was a repetition of the Red and White Groups characteristic of the Tribe, an Uku with seven clan councilors and minor officials opposed to a Skayegusta with seven clan councilors and minor ceremonial officers. Within each town was a circular shaped council house containing a fireplace in the center and two concentric rows of seats about the center, the outer row for white officials and the inner row for red officials.

Conflicts between towns were frequently settled in contests of an athletic nature the most important of which was the "Ball Game." This game was a variety of the widespread Indian la crosse and was played between ceremonial ball teams representing each village at stated occasions. The rules and taboos surrounding this game resembled those of war and the maintenance of the health of the players required extensive ritual and magic.

The element of conflict which ran so strongly through the basic social structure of the Tribe also colored the psychological outlook. This is particularly exemplified in the rituals and superstitions connected with health and disease. The whole of the plant world was regarded as at war with the animal creation and man's involvement in this strife lead to disease. The animals were regarded as the chief (magical) sources of disease in man and it was therefore imperative to enlist the aid of the plants for curative purposes. Almost the only kind of disease not arising from malevolence of some kind was that group of disorders incurred through taboo violation which resulted in uncleanness. The shedding of blood was a particular cause of uncleanness and the health of each village was protected by monthly rites of "going to water" to cleanse from all menstrual taints. The most important of the monthly rites was the "Great New Moon of Autumn" which was held in

October when the leaves began to fall into the streams and thus impart the curative powers of the trees to the water.

Between the animals and man there was waged a perpetual blood feud. The Cherokee were divided into seven clans and they considered the animals to be likewise divided into clans, one for each species. Between animal clans and human clans there could exist conditions of blood revenge incurred by the slaughter of animals for food by man. Whenever deer, eagles, wolves, bears or other animals were killed the hunter had to resort to special rites to prevent the kinsmen of the dead animal from taking revenge on him. The office of hunter became attached to certain specialists familiar with the proper magic for the occasion.

Plants, in addition to furnishing friendly aid in the war against animals, also formed the mainstay of the diet when game was scarce or when enemies were pressing. Maize was sacred above all other plants and was said to have been first obtained at the beginning of the world by two brothers from their mother's blood after they had committed matricide. A series of important periodic festivals accompanied the various phases of the planting and harvesting of the maize. The ceremony of the "First New Moon of Spring" prepared the ground for the reception of new life in the planting of April. Then ensued a long period of anxious waiting and semi-starvation while the people were waiting for the new crop and these events were symbolized in the fasts and mortifications of the next two festivals, the "Preliminary Green Corn Feast" of August when the maize was first fit to taste and the true "Green Corn Feast" of September when the grain was finally harvested. In each of these festivals the long wait for food, symbolized in a fast, is terminated in joyful gorging on the roasted ears of fresh maize of the new year which gave renewed life to the Tribe.

The clans of the Cherokee helped to maintain the unity which was so greatly needed in a military people. Blood brothers of one of the seven clans recognized each other everywhere and fought shoulder to shoulder in war. Clan membership descended by inheritance through the mother and it was she or one of her brothers who arranged for the marriages of the children of the family. In spite of the numerous advantages which accrued naturally through the addition of a new hunter to the community of the wife, the groom was required to compensate in some manner, either by gifts or services, the family of the bride. The penalty of death was prescribed for whomever married within his own clan.

The manner in which some of the basic life problems--protection, internal order, health, food supply, and mating--were met by certain social institutions among the Cherokee, institutions which were shared with many other of the tribes of the Southeastern

Area, has been summarily sketched from the meagre records. The coming of the white man in the eighteenth century upset the ancient order of things and a readjustment was made tardily and with great travail. A series of wars with the English-speaking people resulted in the decimation, scattering and deportation of a great majority of the Tribe. By the middle of the nineteenth century only a small remnant of the Kituhwa Division of the Cherokee still clung to their ancient fastnesses in the Unakas or Great Smokies along the Tuckaseegee and Oconaluftee Rivers. Here they were re-consolidated through both their own efforts and the aid of friendly whites and form today a fairly compact mass of some 2,000 persons organized in six towns or settlements.

KINSHIP TERMS AND BEHAVIOR TODAY

As might have been expected, the present day Cherokee Society of North Carolina contains both native and white institutions. The formal set-up of the political system is democratic, each of the towns electing members of local administering boards, a Tribal Chief and a General Council. This material need not concern us here, however, since there is much in the kinship and mating system which is virtually untouched by white influence and customs.

The smallest social unit is the household which consists generally of the simple domestic family. Relatives through the female side of the house, such as the mother's or daughter's connections, occur frequently in addition to the simple family. The father is the ostensible head of the family and holds the title to the land from the Tribe in his own name. The land is leased only and cannot be acquired in fee absolute. Households are acquired through inheritance, homesteading, purchase and exchange.

In order to best comprehend the Cherokee relationship system let us imagine the Cherokee male informant describing his relatives to us as he knows them.

"My father I call 'gidada.' I also say 'gidada' when speaking to my father's brothers and to any member of my father's clan who is a male. When I speak to my father's sister or to any female belonging to his clan I say 'gidoki.' My father and his clan must be respected by me and I can never joke with them or be on familiar terms with them. I must defend my father and his clan from all disparaging attacks from others.

"My mother I call 'gidzi.' I also say 'gidzi' when speaking to my mother's sisters or to any woman of my clan who marries someone of my father's clan. I and my mother have

always the same clan since I inherit my clan from her. In fact all of my brothers and sisters inherit the same clan as I do from my mother. I distinguish my mother's brother by the term 'gidudji.'

"My sister I call 'ungida.' She calls me 'ungida' too. I call any woman of my own clan 'ungida' except those whom I call 'gidzi' and 'gilisi' (grandmother). My older brother I call 'unkinili' and my younger brother I call 'unkinutsi.' For protection my sister looks to me and I look to my older brother. My sister calls her sister 'ungilu'i,' and does not distinguish older from younger. All the members of my clan who are older than me I call 'unkinili,' except those whom I call 'gidudji' and those who are younger than myself I call 'unkinutsi.' I am on terms of familiarity with all of them and can play all sorts of tricks on them. In speaking of ourselves my brothers, sisters and myself call ourselves 'otsalinudji' (we brothers and sisters).

"My son or daughter I call 'agwetsi.' I also call the son or daughter of any of my brothers 'agwetsi' but my sister's son and daughter I call 'ungiwina' and 'ungwatu' (nephew and niece). My own children are of my wife's clan and I have to respect them. I can joke with sister's children, however, since they are of my own clan.

"My son's son I call 'unginisi' but my son's daughter and my daughter's son and daughter I call 'ungilisi.' I also call my sister's son's son 'unginisi' but her son's daughter and her daughter's son and daughter I call 'ungilisi.' I always joke with and tease my 'ungilisi' and 'unginisi.'

"My father's father I call 'ginisi' and although I ought to respect him I don't. I call my father's father's brothers 'ginisi' also and always joke and play with them. My father's mother and my mother's mother and their sisters I call 'gilisi' or 'grandmother' and I can joke and play with them. My mother's father and his brothers I call 'gidudu' and I am on terms of familiarity with them.

"There are also several names which I give to people who are married to my relatives, or otherwise related to me. My wife's parents I call 'unatsi' and she calls my parents 'djidzo'i.' We have to respect each other's parents just as we respect our own parents. I call my wife's brothers and sisters 'agwelaksi' or 'in-laws' and I joke with them a great deal. They call me 'agwelaksi' also. My son's son I call 'agidzohi' and my daughter's husband 'aginudji.' I have to respect both of these relatives. My mother's brother's wife I call 'agilana' and my father's sister's husband I call 'gidudiya.'"

HOW RELATIVES ARE DISTINGUISHED

The main bases for distinguishing relatives among the Cherokee are lineage, generation, reciprocity of relationship, sex and age. These will be mentioned in order.

Four lineages are distinguished, namely, father's matrilineal, mother's matrilineal, mother's father's matrilineal and father's father's matrilineal. In the father's matrilineal lineage all of the females are either "fathers' sisters" or "grandmothers," all of the males "fathers" or "grandfathers." All men marrying women of this lineage are "grandfathers" and women marrying men of this lineage are "mothers" if of one's own clan and "step-parents" otherwise. Any child of a man of this line is a "brother" or a "sister." In the mother's matrilineal line the females may be "grandmothers," "mothers," "sisters," "nieces" (male sp.) or "children" (female sp.). The men of this lineage are "grandfathers," "mothers' brothers," "brothers," "nephews" (male sp.) or "children" (female sp.). All of the women who marry a "grandfather" of this lineage are "grandmothers" and the women who marry "mothers' brothers" are given a special term. In the mother's father's matrilineal lineage and the father's father's matrilineal lineage all of the men are "grandfathers" and the women "grandmothers." All men marrying into these two lineages are "grandfathers" and all women marrying into these two lineages are "grandmothers." As we shall see below, the four fundamental lineages correspond with the four clans with whom the individual has special relationships.

The distinctions of generation are of the "bifurcate merging" type of Lowie, one-half of the collaterals being merged with the lineal line. Parallel cousins are classed as brothers and sisters while cross cousins are relegated to ascendent or descendent generations, depending on the lineage.

Self reciprocal terms are used between grandparents and grandchildren, brothers and sisters, brothers-in-law, and others. In these relationships a merging of social personalities is secured in both terminology and behavior.

Sex of the speaker may be made clear by implication as for example in the case wherein the male speaker only calls his sister's children "nephew" and "niece." The sex of the person spoken to is very frequently distinguished as may be seen in the special terms for father, mother, aunt and uncle. The sex of the person through whom relationship is traced is distinguished in a few terms such as those for uncle's wife and aunt's husband.

Age criteria are implied in the terms distinguishing older and younger brothers and in accessory terms of a like nature

applied to father's and mother's brothers.

The range of the kinship terminology is extensible to include all persons with whom the individual may come into contact. Qualificatory terms such as "second" or "far away" may be attached to the terms applied to remoter relatives. The matrilineal clan is the chief agency in the extension of kinship terms. Any man whose father belonged to one's own father's clan is a brother to one's self. In general the relations of individuals to one's own four key clans determines the relationships of these individuals to one's self. Magical extension of kinship terms to animal, plant and other world spirits is also frequently resorted to.

THE SEVEN CLANS

The names of the seven clans of the Cherokee are (1) Ani-wahiya or Wolf, (2) Anikawi or Deer, (3) Anidjiskwa or Bird, (4) Aniwodi or Red Paint, (5) Anisahoni or Blue Plant, (6) Anigotigewi or Wild Potato, and (7) Anigilohi or Long Hair (some say Twister). The distribution of members of these clans in the six villages was found to be very uneven, some of the clans far outnumbering others.

The nuclear element in the Cherokee kinship and social organization is the peculiar system of preferential mating prevalent among them which system is inextricably bound up with clan affiliations, usages of familiarity and respect between kindred, magical rites and other phases of the culture. Preferential mating among the Cherokee restricts the choice of a mate to persons in the father's father's lineage or the mother's father's lineage which groups contain only "grandfathers" and "grandmothers." Thus the Cherokee, like Rivers' Pentecostal Islanders and the Ungarinyin of Australia, marry their own grandmothers. But let the Cherokee informant continue his account.

"My father was of the Wild Potato Clan. I must always respect his Clan. I must always defend its members from defamation or attack. I am a brother of anyone whose father was of that Clan.

"My own Clan is the Wolf and that is the Clan also of my brothers, sisters and mother. I am free to joke with all members of my Clan except those whom I call 'mother.' I cannot, however, marry a woman of the Wolf Clan. Whenever I am traveling I stay with my brothers of the Wolf Clan and when they visit my village they may stay with me. It is important for me to inquire the clan membership of everyone I meet.

"My father's father was of the Deer Clan. Whenever I find anyone belonging to that Clan I can tease and joke with them

as much as I want. I must always try to make fun of them in some remark and they do the same to me. I am always visiting people of the Deer Clan and I married a girl of that Clan. My mother's father was of the Paint Clan and I treated these people the same as I did the Deer Clan. I could, in fact, have married a girl of the Paint Clan. Deer and Paint People are all 'ginisi' (grandparents) to me.

"My wife's father is of the Blue Plant Clan. I respect him as my father-in-law but I joke with Joe West who is also of the Blue Clan but who is a brother to me because his father is of the Wild Potato Clan. My wife's father's father was of the Wolf Clan so she was always teasing and joking with Wolf people. I am a Wolf so that is how she met me. My wife's mother's father was of the Bird Clan so she could tease Bird people and could have married one of them.

"It all amounts to this. Potato Clan people I respect and never marry, Wolf Clan people I can joke with but can't marry, Deer and Paint Clan people I can tease and marry and toward the three remaining clans, Blue, Bird and Twister, I have no general behavior but treat the individuals according to their personal relationships to the Wolf or Wild Potato Clan."

FAMILIAR RELATIONS BETWEEN RELATIVES

It can be seen from the discussion in the foregoing section that specific usages forbid marriage with one's own father's clan or with one's mother's clan and that the presumptions of behavior give little opportunity for chance matings outside of certain clearly defined limits. Preferential mating is brought about through the long continued agency of usages of familiarity and respect acting on the individual from birth to maturity. One learns as a matter of course to respect fathers, mothers, aunts, uncles, one's wife's or husband's parents, fathers' fathers and one's children and their spouses. On the other hand one learns to joke with brothers and sisters and their spouses, parallel cousins, grandparents, grandchildren, one's own spouse and the spouse's brothers and sisters.

The exhibition of familiarity behavior takes place on all occasions of ordinary social contact but the most typical forms occur on the occasion of the dance. There are some score different dances still current among the Cherokee associated with plants, animals and seasonal event. One of the important groups is that called the Friendship Dances. The term "friendship" used in this application refers to the renewal of the bonds of social

solidarity between the community and persons who have been separated from it through some taboo. This separation occurs principally through the uncleannesses involved in childbirth, death and the menses. Tending to recur at monthly intervals the Friendship Dances suggest the symbolical renewal of intersexual familiarities which have ceased during the taboos of the menstrual period. Between persons of the opposite sex in the grandparent-grandchild (clan) relationship tickling, poking, joking, kissing and obscene behavior is indulged in. Close attachments and engagements which result in marriage flow from these occasions.

The development of the grandparent-grandchild (clan) joking familiarity in children takes place in a special manner through the medium of an indirect familiarity. At an early age in his son's life the father speaks to him concerning matters of the heart and marriage. "You must marry my aunt," he tells the boy. The boy thinks at once of the old and ugly person whom he calls "grandmother" and whom he already fears because of her strong teasing so he naturally shrinks in horror at the suggestion from his sire. As he grows older he becomes accustomed to teasing the granny himself a bit and she leads him into the habit of joking with others of her own clan who are of his own age, one of the girls of which group he eventually marries.

Correct behavior in mating is reinforced by another form of familiarity, namely the extremely satirical and sarcastic raillery prevailing between clan brothers. Whenever a man of a given clan leads the dance he sings the leading song and as he sings his theme is the misbehavior of his clan brothers, particularly their sexual misbehavior. If it be some outrage against the rules, such as keeping company with a woman of his father's clan the offender is twitted unmercifully from that time on by the rest of his clan brothers and sisters and grandparents. His only defenders will be those who call themselves the children of his clan and in this case their defense can only be half-hearted. Should the culprit fail to find some similar fault in his teaser to sing aloud, about his only other recourse is to practice magic and make his relatives "forget" that he has violated the rules. But few are those indeed who are powerful enough to fly in the face of these very constant and forceful sanctions of correct behavior beside which the potency of American small town gossip is as nil.

Another form of correcting ridicule occurs in the tobacco joke. The essential element in this behavior consists in plaguing the fellow who marries the father's sister for tobacco. If he be from some outside clan he can frequently escape his plagues and being beaten up every time he runs out of tobacco to distribute

but if he is a person who has married his own "giloki" or aunt he can hardly escape his brothers and sisters who take it upon themselves to make him miserable until he leaves his wife.

THE ROLE OF MAGIC AND MYTH

Closely allied to the Cherokee kinship system is the enormously elaborated magical procedure used for all of the affairs of life. Although much of this procedure relates to the merely practical affairs of life, such as good crops, successful hunting and the like, other forms relate to such involved matters as the cure of disease, revenge upon one's enemies and the securing of a girl as a wife. It can easily be seen that the social implications of this type of magic would be numberless. We can mention but one example.

The young man who desires a certain girl for a wife recites a magical prayer at midnight in a low and semi-audible monotone while facing in the direction of her house. The intent of the prayer is to cause the girl to dream about the young man and to then fall violently in love with him. The prayer includes some five parts. In the first part the young man indicates his solidarity with the good and powerful spirits by an affirmation and in substance asserts that the authorities in the case are on his side. Secondly, he asserts that no other man shall have power over this girl and that she is reserved and separated from the rest of mankind since she is destined for him alone. Thirdly, he mentions the fact that there are close bonds between himself and the girl, that she is of a clan with whom it is lawful for him to marry and that the kinship rules are being observed. Fourthly, he compares his own virtues with those of the rest of mankind, to the infinite disadvantage of the latter who are credited with being polecats and crows. Thus he effectually disposes of his clan brothers as possible rivals. Fifthly, he reiterates his own individual irresistibility and reaches out with infinite power to seize the soul of the girl which he then unites with his own.

This is attraction magic of the most potent type and no girl can resist it unless she has been previously protected on retiring by certain defensive prayers. She at first becomes lonesome and blue and then sickens while she pines away, refusing food or other distraction. She can think only of the young man who has woven this spell over her and she foolishly runs after him whenever he appears. No one need remain long without a wife with such magic at hand, even though he be wrinkled, old and ugly. All attraction prayers run fairly true to this form, possessing in common the ele-

ments of affirmation of personal charms, solidarity by identification with the desired person who has first been carefully separated from influence of the rest of mankind, invocation of powerful spirits, and final removal of all undesirable elements and persons from the scene.

One other element in functional relationship with the kinship set-up remains to be mentioned, namely the mythology. In the actions of the animals who are the principals of Cherokee Mythology there is an accurate reflection of human behavior and their society is Cherokee society projected from existing norms and modes of thought. As in the case of the magical procedures a single type example must suffice to indicate the connection.

One of the most powerful forces operating between animals is the trickster motif. This consists essentially in the playing of practical jokes by one character on another in the course of which one animal actor is belittled and made to lose something of which he has been proud. The principle trickster is the rabbit but he sometimes proves gullible himself and loses out to some other animal. The bear loses his tail, the otter his coat, the deer his sharp teeth and the 'possum his furry tail. This trickster element, with all of the flavor of joking and teasing behavior between Cherokee relatives, constitutes a favorite plot in explanatory myths. The elements of humor in the story can be fully appreciated by the Cherokee listener with his background of experience with the satirical joking of his fellow clansmen.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion the unified nature of the conception of Cherokee Society herein advanced is called to the attention. Each institution or usage considered was shown to have a definite role in connection with the social system as a whole. The distinctions made between relatives lend emphasis to four fundamental lineages from which emerge four key clans toward which the individual has specific relationships. With the consummation of these relationships the individual fulfils the basic potentialities of his life, the acquirement of a wife, social position, and life status in general.

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